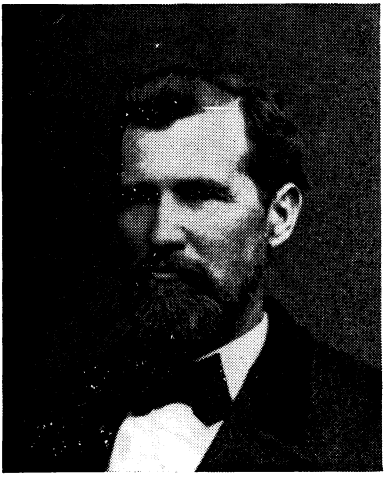
Dr. David Porter Smythe, an Early Texan Botanist

S. W. Geiser

Texas, in her pioneer period (1820-1880) had about twelve hundred persons interested (professionally or as amateurs) in some phase of natural science or related fields. This number will seem excessive to the casual reader; but the statement, based on studies that have extended over many years, is sober truth. One would not expect to find many amateur astronomers in a frontier country; yet scrutiny of the newspapers of northern Texas after the total-annular solar eclipse of 29 July, 1878, disclosed at that time a score of amateur astronomers who with theodolite, field-glasses, or telescope, observed the eclipse, and in some cases sketched the corona at the moment of totality[1]. Elijah Hinsdale Burritt (1794-1838), engineer, mathematician, and astronomer, whose *Geography of the Heavens* was long a popular school text-book before the Civil War, came to Texas in 1837 as head of a small band of emigrants from Connecticut, and died in Houston in the spring of 1838. A number of engineers of a high order of intelligence, beginning with Eduard Harkort (1798-1836) and coming down to Grenville M. Dodge (1831-1916) worked for longer or shorter periods in Texas, and are to be identified with the scientific development or exploration of the State. One of these early engineers, Tipton Walker (1822-70), made especially careful astronomical determinations of the lati-

[1]Geiser, S. W., [Major lunar eclipses in Texas, 1755-1880; an aid in chronology], *Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, *47*, 1943, 180-81.

tude and longitude of fourteen principal towns of early Texas (1858); and a number of his compeers, engineers associated with the building of railroads or the surveying of rivers for the purpose of navigation [as William C. McKinstry, with his *Colorado Navigator* (1840)], deserve study and historical biography[2].



Dr. D. Port Smith (1824-89)

One of the most interesting of our botanical students of Early Texas was Dr. David Porter Smythe (or D. Port Smythe, as he was generally known in Texas.) I cannot call him a botanical "collector," for (unlike most of our botanical students in Texas) he seems to have sent no specimens of our plants to botanical museums or herbaria[3]. A recent issue of *The Texas Geographic Magazine* reprints a notable account by Dr. Smythe of a journey he made, in May, 1852, across Texas from Leon County to (present) Palo Pinto County on the Upper Brazos[4]. The reprinted account (which in the originals bore the caption-title, "A Journal of the Travels of D. Port Smythe, M. D., of Centerville, Texas, from that Place to the Mouth of the Palo Pinto, on the Upper Brazos") appeared originally in six chapters in *The Leon Pioneer* of Centerville, during July and

[2]Geiser, S. W., "Abram Morris Gentry (1821-83)," *ibid.*, *47*, 1943, 308-09.

[3]Dr. Harold N. Moldenke, in his splendid monograph on the *Verbenaceæ* of Texas (C. L. Lundell, ed., *Flora of Texas*, v. 3, pt. 1, 1942) lists 43 species of the genus *Verbena* from Texas. In the preparation of this work, Moldenke examined 3656 "sheets" of Texan specimens of *Verbenaceæ* contained in 64 prominent herbaria of the United States and Europe. Seven species are common in that part of Texas explored by Smythe, but no sheet of Smythe's collecting was contained in the herbaria examined by Moldenke.

[4]Day, Donald & S. W. Geiser, "D. Port Smythe's Journey across Early Texas," in *The Texas Geographic Magazine*, v. VI, no. 2, 1942, p. 1-20 *map, facsimile.*

August of 1852[5]. It is a remarkable production, and gives information on the topography, zoology, and botany of the region traversed (which now comprises parts of Leon, Limestone, Navarro, Hill, Johnson, Parker, and Palo Pinto counties. In spite of the brevity of the trip (May 3 to 14, inclusive), the account is packed with material of the greatest interest. The botanical identifications are remarkably close, and an informed present-day botanist familiar with the region is able to identify most of the species listed. It appears (from the names employed) that Smythe had at hand a copy of Eaton & Wright's *North American Botany* (8th ed., 1840), the leading manual of the day, and doubtless the one which Smythe studied at Philadelphia, when a student of materia medica at the University of Pennsylvania with Dr. George B. Wood[6]. When we realize that his notes were, by his own admission, "crude observations made by the way, chiefly penciled down, after the fatiguing journey of the day," one is amazed at the breadth and accuracy of knowledge shown by this frontier physician. Besides his botanical and zoological observations, his notes on the geology and soils, and the fossils encountered in the region traversed, are of distinct value. His notes on the game of the prairie in (present) Hill County are also of the greatest interest to one concerned with the former wildlife of Texas. The culture of the man is apparent when he most aptly compares the Texan scene before him with the landscapes of Claude Lorraine (1600-82), a famous French artist of the seventeenth century.

David Porter Smythe was born in Sumterville, Sumter County, Alabama, 26 March, 1824, and died at Bryan, Texas, 19 October, 1889. Of his early life, but little is known. He was named after his mother's cousin, Commodore David

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[5]The chapters appeared as follows: I, June 9; II, June 16; III, June 23; IV, June 30; V, July 7; VI, July 14.

[6]George Bacon Wood (1797-1879), M. D., Pennsylvania, 1818; professor of materia medica, 1835-50, and of theory & practice of medicine, 1850-60, University of Pennsylvania. Besides his great *Dispensatory of the United States* (many eds.), he published *A Treatise on the Practice of Medicine* (2 v., 1847; 5th ed., 1858), *Therapeutics and Pharmacology* (2 v., 1856; 3d ed., 1868), and *Lectures and Addresses on Medical Subjects* (1859).

Porter, U.S.N., who about this time was cruising in pursuit of pirates in the Caribbean, and was much of a popular hero. His family seems later to have moved from Alabama to Mississippi (probably about the time of the opening of the Indian cessions in 1834). In 1847 (when Smythe was twenty-three years old) he matriculated in the medical school of the University of Pennsylvania, from Mississippi. At this time, the M.D. degree was conferred after two "sessions" of lectures (of four and a half months each), if the candidate had previously served an apprenticeship with some practicing physician. Smythe evidently had had two years or more of such apprenticeship, for he appears to have attended only one session—that of 1847-48—and then returned to his home to practice medicine[7]. During his "year" at Philadelphia, Smythe had as instructors some of the most famous medical men in America: William E. Horner in anatomy, Samuel Jackson in the institutes of medicine, George B. Wood in materia medica and pharmacology, James B. Rogers in chemistry, William Gibson in surgery, and Nathaniel Chapman in the practice of medicine. It was a remarkable group, for in those days, Philadelphia was perhaps the leading medical center of the United States[8].

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[7]This was common enough in its day: many frontier physicians never had a day's formal teaching in a medical school. They were certified as qualified by their "preceptors," similar diploma-less practitioners, under whom they had served apprenticeships of two, three, or four years. Even in New England in the 18th century the preceptorial system prevailed. Dr. F. R. Packard (*Proc. Amer. Phil. Soc.*, 86, 1942, 99) mentions as examples two physicians, Benjamin Gale (1715-90) and Edward Augustus Holyoke (1728-1829) who had received no medical education beyond that received in their apprenticeship to established practitioners, and yet achieved professional eminence.

[8]William Edwards Horner (1793-1853) was professor of anatomy (1819-53), and published a number of important anatomical works; Samuel Jackson (1787-1872) was for 28 years professor of the institutes of medicine, and for a long time occupied a leading place as a physician and surgeon; George Bacon Wood (1797-1879) was professor of materia medica (1835-50) and of the theory and practice of medicine (1850-60). Wood had a private botanic garden, and spent of his personal means about $20,000 on charts and models. It was from Wood that Smythe learned his botany. James Blythe Rogers (1803-52) was the oldest of the four famous Rogers brothers, who contributed so greatly to the advancement of American science. William Gibson (1788-1868) of Baltimore was famous as the first American surgeon to ligate the common iliac artery; and Nathaniel Chapman (1780-1853) was a prominent teacher of clinical medicine at Pennsylvania from 1816 to 1850. Only one of Smythe's teachers, Dr. Hugh L. Hobbs, professor of obstetrics and the diseases of women and children, was so obscure as to be missing from common biographical reference books.

Family records indicate that David Porter Smythe came to Texas in 1850, sometime after the taking of the 1850 census. Masonic records tend to corroborate the tradition[9]. Certainly he was well established in Centerville, Leon County, in 1852. Here he married in the same year as his trip to the Palo Pinto country[10], and probably remained in practice there until the outbreak of the Civil War. In that struggle, he was Surgeon of the 17th Texas Volunteer Infantry, Walker's Texas Division, C.S.A., and saw service in the Trans-Mississippi Department. Contrary to what one might hope from a man with Smythe's medical background, he seems to have contributed little to the literature of his profession. The only paper that I can find from his pen is one dealing with the epidemic typhoid pneumonia at Camp Nelson, Ark., in the autumn of 1862[11]. It was not a remarkable publication.

In 1868, Smythe is listed as professor of chemistry in Galveston Medical College & Hospital, as an 'M.D. graduate of the University of Pennsylvania in 1854.' This, of course, is a mistake, as Dean William Pepper assures me. In 1870, Dr. Smythe lived in Bryan, Brazos County; for his name, with that of his wife and three children, appears in the 1870 census schedules of that county.

Smythe returned to the University of Pennsylvania in 1873-74 for the completion of his work for the M.D. degree. This he received in 1874, and then returned to Bryan to practice. At nearby College Station, with the establishment of the Texas Agricultural and Mechanical College, he was elected college physician, a position he held for two years. He lived at the same time at Bryan, five miles away. In the

[9]D. Port Smythe was a charter member in 1852 of Keechi Lodge No. 140, A.F. & A.M., at Centerville; in 1874 he affiliated with Brazos Union Lodge No. 129 at Bryan (from which he demitted in 1880). He is not listed in the 1850 or 1860 census, at Centerville.

[10]On Oct. 6, 1852, at Leona, Leon County, Texas, Dr. Smythe married Mary Lou Young, daughter of John and Harriett (Holliman) Young, of Paris, Tenn. Mrs. Smythe at the time of her marriage was a teacher in Leon County.

[11]Smythe, D. Port, "Pneumonia typhoides, as it appeared in an epidemic form at Camp Nelson, Arkansas, during the summer of 1862." Texas Medical Journal, 1, 1867, 27-35.

[12]Catalogues of Texas A. & M. College of Texas, sessions 1876-77, 1877-78, 1878-79, 1879-80.

Catalogue for 1878-79, his name appears as "Surgeon, and Professor of Anatomy, Physiology, and Hygiene," and in that of 1879-80, as "Professor of Biology, Hygiene, and Veterinary Science."[12] In the Report of President John Garland James of the College, dated July 1, 1880 (and printed in the *Catalogue* for 1879-80, p. 49), occurs the following recommendation relative to Dr. Smythe:

> The very important chair of Biology and Veterinary Science should be established, and could be well provided for by assigning the College Surgeon, Dr. D. Port Smythe, to it, and thus putting him on the same footing with the other professors. He would be required to discharge as a part of his duties, the service now required of him as Surgeon, and being quartered on the grounds, instead of five miles distant as heretofore, he could much more satisfactorily and conveniently render his medical services.

I have seen no copy of the *Catalogue* for 1880-81, but the Fifth Annual Report of the A. & M. College of Texas, session of 1880-81, contains a one-page report (p. 30) by D. Port Smythe, which begins, "I beg to submit my first annual report of the Department of Biology, Hygiene, and Veterinary Science. . . . " President James' report (p. 15) recommended that the classes in Biology and Veterinary Science be united with those of Agriculture; and in the *Catalogue* for 1881-82 (p. 7), Dr. Smythe is listed among the "officers of the college" as Physician, and not as a member of the faculty. The Department of Agriculture now listed courses in Anatomy and Veterinary Science, but not Biology[13].

It will thus be seen that Dr. Smythe entered the employ of the College at the beginning, under President Thomas S. Gathright (1876-79), and continued under President John Garland James (1879-83. He must have terminated his relationship as Surgeon of the College at the end of the 1881-82 session, for his successor, Dr. John D. Read, was appointed from the date 1 October, 1882. These were

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[13]I am indebted to Mr. E. W. Winkler, Bibliographer of the University of Texas library, who most kindly scanned for me the various reports of the college, to ascertain the official relationships of Dr. Smythe to the A. & M. College of Texas.

[14]Ousley, Clarence, "History of the Agricultural and Mechanical College of Texas," *Bull. of the Agri. & Mechan. Coll. Texas*, IV ser., v. 6, no. 8, 1935, 44-56.

troublous years at the College, as can be seen from Ousley's fascinating history[14].

After the severance of his connection with the College, Smythe resumed his practice at Bryan. He was now fifty-eight years old. Old residents of Bryan still recall him as over six feet tall, with handsome aquiline features. His manners were pleasing, his speech that of a cultured and well-educated man. For many years he had been member of the board of examiners for teachers of Brazos County, and this work he continued for the few remaining years of his life. He died on 19 October, 1889, and was buried at Bryan.

Like many another cultivated man who came to early Texas, Smythe appears to have been finally submerged by the rigorous frontier conditions of life. The Centerville to which he went from Philadelphia, in the 'fifties, was a village of some two hundred people. Medicine here was reduced to its simplest terms, and many of his drugs were perforce the native plants of Texas. That Smythe had outstanding ability as an observant botanist is clearly evident from his 1852 "Journey," first above mentioned. It would seem that if he could have been less immersed in a frontier environment where "levelling" was the order of the day, and in one where actual differences in gifts as between individuals were recognized, we would have been richer for his labors in the field of botany over the years. As it is, we can only regret that no further papers came from his pen; and that in the humdrum life of earning a living on a frontier, he lost the inspiration and afflatus of his early years. Gideon Lincecum never lost sight of the gleam, nor Lindheimer, nor Dr. Ernst Kapp, the famous geographer of Sisterdale; but again, they were of a different texture from D. Port Smythe. At the same time, one can recognize with grateful appreciation the gifts and the work (small as it is in amount) of this amateur botanist on the Texan frontier.